

# *The Orange County Register*

**Academic freedoms erode since the attacks // Education: Orange Coast College case is just one example of how classrooms are less accommodating to free expression.**

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**By MARLA JO FISHER**

**An Orange Coast College professor was placed on paid leave after Muslim students alleged that he called them terrorists in class.**

**A New Mexico professor known for his anti-war sentiments was threatened with firing after joking that anyone who blows up the Pentagon gets my vote.'**

**In New York City, trustees for City University denounced as seditious'' a public forum that included the idea that American colonialism contributed to the terrorist attacks.**

**There's a new attitude toward academic freedom in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. College professors accustomed to saying nearly anything they want without fear of censure suddenly are finding themselves investigated, publicly criticized and even threatened with dismissal for making remarks deemed by some as offensive or inappropriate in the post-attack world.**

**Universities have been the one place in our society where the free exchange of ideas has been encouraged and recognized as an important source of freedom," said Martin Snyder, spokesman for the American Association of University Professors. It's not that faculty and students don't say stupid things and make mistakes, but out of that dynamic comes a truth that is healthy for society.'**

**Ken Hearlson, an associate professor of political science at Costa Mesa's Orange Coast College, has attracted national attention since being placed on paid leave Sept. 20, pending an investigation into complaints by four Muslim students that he had offended and insulted them.**

**I believe the school overreacted to three or four students' comments and allegations, which my attorney, myself and our union representative believe were absolutely false," Hearlson said.**

**Hearlson, a self-described conservative Christian who has been at the college since 1980, was teaching a large introduction-to-government class Sept. 18 when he began a discussion about the terrorist attacks the previous week.**

**Student versions of what occurred differ, but the controversy began during a heated discussion about the U.S. role in supporting the Israeli government against the Palestinian movement. It became a discussion of the role of Muslim fundamentalists in supporting terrorism.**

**Mooath Saidi, 18, a second- year student among the four who filed the complaint, said Hearlson pointed at him after a heated exchange.**

**He pointed in my direction and said, You drove two planes into the World Trade Center. You killed 5,000 people. You are a terrorist,' " Saidi said. Someone in the class said, Do you realize what you just said? You just accused him of the bombings.' "**

**Other students disputed Saidi's allegations and said Hearlson never accused anyone in the class of terrorism.**

**I think the students blew a lot of things out of proportion," said Melanie Weigand, 23. He was talking about Muslim terrorists, not them."**

**He tells you from Day 1 he's going to get in your face, and that's how he teaches," student Beau Marseilles said. He's the best teacher I ever had."**

**College President Margaret Gratton did not return phone calls. College spokesman Jim Carnett said Wednesday that the investigation has been completed and that results are being reviewed.**

**Other OCC professors have published newspaper opinion pieces supporting the decision to place Hearlson on leave and questioning the lengths to which a teacher should be allowed to provoke students without censure.**

**Hearlson is being defended by Philadelphia-based Foundation for Individual Liberties in Education, which is demanding his reinstatement.**

**Even if he singled out students, that is called shock- value teaching and it is done all the time," foundation Executive Director Thor Halvorssen said. Feminists point to males in their classrooms all the time and say, You're a white male. You murdered millions of native Americans.' "**

**Around the country, professors recently have seen their Web sites censored, been publicly rebuked for teachings and writings critical of U.S. policies, and have been bombarded with hate mail and even threatened with firing in the emotional aftermath of the attacks.**

**It cuts across both sides of the political spectrum. To avoid offending foreign scholars, students and staff members have been ordered to remove flags, and in one instance were ordered not to wear flag pins as they went on the air at a University of Missouri TV station, Snyder said.**

**Snyder compared the current campus atmosphere to that of the Vietnam War or the McCarthy era.**

**When there is a lot of patriotic publicity and people are scared, it suddenly becomes seditious and treasonous to express an unpopular opinion," Snyder said.**

**At San Diego State University, an international student was admonished in writing by an administrator for getting into a heated argument in Arabic with other students over the bombings.**

**In Orange County, Fullerton College President Michael Viera investigated student complaints that a professor of Middle Eastern descent had stomped on an American flag in class.**

**There was a lot of confusion and concern about it because for a while there was a rumor circulating that it happened on the day of the attacks," Viera said.**

**Ultimately, Viera said, he determined that the professor did stomp on the flag on the first day of the class -- but weeks before the attack -- as a teaching tool designed to provoke emotions from students and engage them in a discussion about patriotism.**

**Viera said he did not discipline the professor because he respected his academic freedom, but he suggested to him that this isn't a good time to repeat the experiment.**

**I would certainly think it would be viewed differently today, and the emotionalism surrounding it is such that you couldn't get a teachable moment out of it," Viera said.**

**The atmosphere has made life difficult for students, too.**

**In the wake of the OCC incident and the attacks, Saidi said students are angry at him and other Muslim students.**

**People are making remarks like, Nice bombs you dropped on us,' " Saidi said. We don't blame Christians in general for what Timothy McVeigh did. You cannot blame all Muslims for one psychopath."**